

By Mary Westbrook

The Promise of Prom

Prom may never be in the same sales league as weddings or corporate work, but there is potential in the market, for the right florist.

Four billion dollars.

That's how much **PromSpot.com** — the kid sister of wedding powerhouse **TheKnot.com** — estimated U.S. teens spent collectively on prom in 2005. To put that number in perspective, it's about the GDP of Haiti.

"It's definitely become a reliable, growing industry," Wendy Liebmann, a retail analyst at WSL Strategic Retail, said to the Associated Press. "And right now, it's booming."

Like brides and grooms, teens heading to prom (and homecoming and winter formal and spring fling, etc.) have plenty of choices when it comes to spending that money — dresses and tuxedos, of course, but also limousines and dinner on the town, plus make-up, hair appointments... When you look at the list and realize how low flowers could potentially fall on a teen's priority list — and how spring dances so often end up wedged against

Mother's Day — it's enough to make a florist throw in the intricately beaded and color-coordinated tussie-mussie — ahem, towel — on the whole prom business.

But, that's not what some florists are doing. Floral Management found florists who are building up prom by streamlining their procedures, beefing up their teen savvy and reinventing corsages, wristlets, boutonnieres — and much more. Want to be the (floral)



Photo by Craig Ambrosio

prom king or queen? Here are some of their best tips to help you get started.

Detention Bound: "Ordinary" corsages and boutonnieres

Head of the Class: Wristlets, bicep bands and mini bouquets

"The kids here would die if we didn't do something original," says Deborah De La Flor, PFCI, AIFD, of Del La Flor Gardens in Cooper City, Fla. — part of metropolitan Ft. Lauderdale. "They've



TREND-SETTER “You have to set the trends in your area,” says Deborah De La Flor of De La Flor Gardens in Cooper City, Fla. “If you say, ‘this is big,’ it’s big.” To help teens pick the perfect prom design, she pins samples on framed felt.

got tattoos and piercings. They want to be recognized.”

De La Flor, who is in the vicinity of five high schools that hold prom each year within a three-week period, knows what she’s talking about. She wrote the book on innovative prom work, literally. In 1996, encouraged by the overwhelming reception she received following an impromptu design demonstration at a trade show, De La Flor published “Florsages,” which is

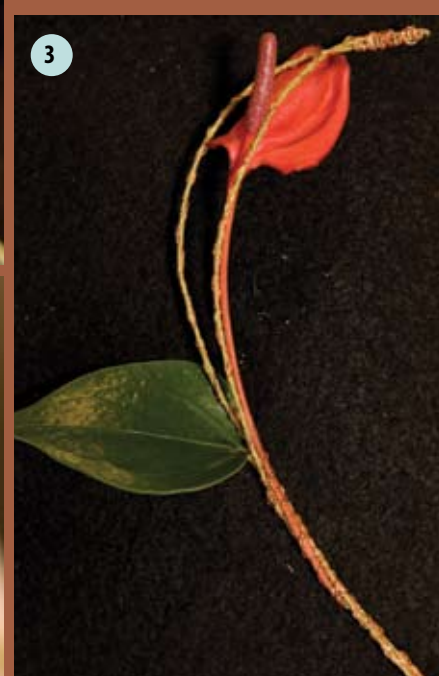
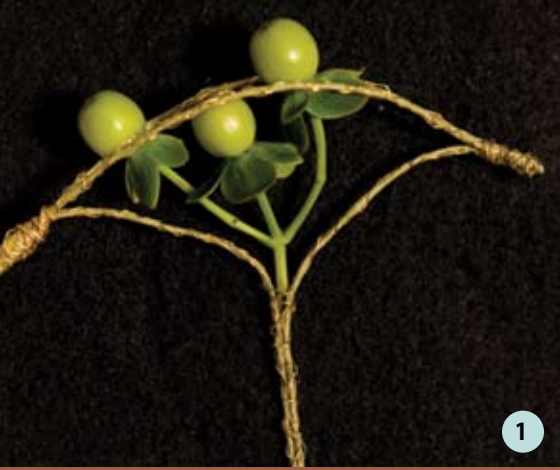
all about floral body design or “wire sculpting” — techniques she uses to create her shop’s one-of-a-kind prom work. Today the shop completes about 600 prom orders a year and has \$1.2 million in annual sales.

“It’s about wearing flowers,” she explains. “We exceed expectations.”

Halfway across the country, Dave Mitchell of Mitchell’s Flowers in Orland Park and Frankfort, Ill., tells a similar story.

“No one wears corsages anymore,” he says. “Everyone’s going toward handheld or clutch bouquets — kind of like bridesmaids’ bouquets. In fact, I take pictures of prom designs and then use them to sell to brides. In that way, it’s a great sales tool.”

On an average year, Mitchell’s two locations will get up to 150 boutonniere and corsage orders and up to 85 clutch bouquet requests, Mitchell says. And, that’s not a trend limited to the Midwest,



Deborah De La Flor, PFCI, AIFD

Del La Flor Gardens

Cooper City, Fla.

Number of high schools nearby:

One school is within 2 miles; four others are close.

Number of prom-related orders a year: About 600

Average prom sale: \$35

Yearbook-worthy quote: "Our designs are always fresh. We exceed expectations."



says Tina Stoecker, AIFD, PFCI, of Designs of the Times in Melbourne, Fla. Across the country, teens are looking for something different.

"Our clients seem to be wanting more unusual looks or funky, fun stuff," Stoecker says. "While only about 1 percent of our clients choose floral accessories other than wristlets (e.g. necklaces, anklets or purses), only 30 percent choose the traditional elastic wristlets."

Detention Bound: Waiting for teens. Head of the Class: Going after teens.

School rules may prohibit you from setting up camp on campus or roaming the halls with fliers, but there are ways to reach students and stay in the administration's good graces.

Two years ago, De La Flor and her staff provided the flowers for a high school fashion show, creating about 35 different designs — from hand-tied bouquets to bracelet and bicep bands.

"It was the best thing ever," De La Flor says. "People were calling our shop the next day. They're still calling our shop because of what they saw at that show." (The event is not annual; otherwise, she'd do it every year.)

Like many florists with healthy prom sales, each fall, Mitchell calls his area high schools to find out the year's dance

NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK Traditional corsages and boutonnières don't cut it with today's teens, says Deborah De LaFlor, PFCI, AIFD, who wrote a book, "Florsages," about her contemporary design style, which she calls wire sculpting (www.delaflogardens.com).

1) "armature florsage" with hypericum 2) bicep piece with dendrobium and beads 3) anthurium and bowed wire 4) hypericum cuff 5) dendrobium and lily grass wristlet 6) calla and ribbon 7) gypsophila and flower gem wristlet.

For recipes, see Info to Go on www.safnow.org.

Photos by Craig Ambrosio

Dave Mitchell

Mitchell's Flowers

Orland Park and Frankfort, Ill.

Number of high schools nearby:

The Orland Park store is close to one major high school and in the vicinity of seven additional schools. The Frankfort shop is across the street from a high school and there are three others in the area.

Number of prom-related orders a year: About 200

Average prom sale: \$22 for corsages; \$7 for boutonnieres; \$65 for bouquets

Yearbook-worthy quote: "I hear other people complain, 'We were working so late.' Not us. We work ahead and get it done early. We're out by 6."



Wayne Jones, AAF, AIFD, PFCI

Flowers by

Wayne Jones

Virginia Beach, Va.

Number of high schools nearby:

Three to four in the vicinity, about a dozen in a larger area.

Number of prom-related orders a year: About 100

Average prom sale: \$20 to \$22

Yearbook-worthy quote: "We encourage people to order early, but we always have some kids who come in at the last minute. That's OK. Maybe it was a good surf day."

dates, which go immediately onto the shop's calendar.

"We try to be cognizant of what's going on at the schools," he says.

"We've done things in the past, like ads in the school paper, but I don't think kids read the ads very much."

Coupons, on the other hand, are a good avenue to explore, says Mitchell, who sends the shop's part-time high school employees out with 10-percent off coupons to share with friends and classmates.

Wayne Jones, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, of Flowers by Wayne Jones in Virginia Beach, Va., had little response from fliers and coupons he sent to the dozen or so public and private high schools in the area, but he was able to leverage his longtime association with the Miss America Pageant to build a local teen following: Jones is now a frequent contributor — through product donation — to local high school pageants, which often are held in the spring.

"We get our name out there," says Jones, who gets about 100 prom-related orders each spring. "When teenagers are looking for flower shops, they're looking for someone that they recognize."

Word of mouth goes a long way in high school corridors, too, according to Tim Farrell, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, of Farrell's Florist in Drexel Hall, Pa., where the corsage and boutonniere orders number "in the thousands" each year.

"A lot of these kids go to multiple dances," he says, adding that once a year the shop will do a prom-themed window display to remind customers that those services are available.

"It should be obvious, or so you'd think," he says. "But sometimes, it's not," and a well-placed display — or marquee reminder — can go a long way.

Detention Bound: Wasting resources on labor-intensive, unprofitable designs.

Head of the Class: Streamlining procedures and minimizing COGS.

De La Flor's prom designs cause waves with teens because they're eye-catching and different, but she recommends them for another reason, too: The cost-



Boomtown Decoded

Whether you've gotten to know this new generation of teens by employing them, selling to them or raising them, you've probably noticed: They're different.

Call them what you will — "Echo Boomers," "Generation Y," or "Millennials" — the group of Americans born between 1982 and 1995 is, already, a powerful group. Collectively they spend **\$170 billion** a year (some of it their money and some of it their parents' money) and make up nearly **a third of the U.S. population**. And while they've come of age at a time when multiple computers are in the home and personal musical players and cell phones are increasingly normal, they might just be **more old-fashioned than you think**, according to a recent CBS News story.

"When you ask kids, 'What do you most hope to achieve there?' where they used to say, 'I wanna be No. 1. I wanna be the best,' increasingly they're saying, 'I wanna be an effective member of the team. I wanna do everything that's required of me,'" historian Neil Howe told CBS.

Howe said he sees the attitude shift as echo boomers' way of "rebell[ing]" against their ambitious — sometimes, self-absorbed — baby boomer parents.

"Nothing could be more anti-boom than being a good team player, right?" Howe said to CBS. "If you go into a public school today, teamwork is stressed everywhere. Team teaching, team grading, community service... the list goes on and on."

Sharon McGukin, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, of Designer's Touch in Carrollton, Ga., says florists truly can leverage some of the generation's unique qualities, turning them into valuable, life-long customers. But, it takes effort.

"This age group has to be taught to purchase flow-


ers," she says. "They are coming of purchasing age in a time of 'eco-chic' where **green is a way of living, not a color**.

If we work to show them that flowers are an affordable luxury that is in harmony with an environmentally friendly lifestyle, they too can be taught to appreciate and buy flowers."

Marketing to echo boomers can take some serious outside-the-box thinking, mainly because this generation is incredibly savvy and quick to pinpoint disingenuous sales pitches. At the same time, **word of mouth** (particularly when it comes from a celebrity or expert source) goes a long way.

"**Buzz is more important today** than it's ever been," Jane Buckingham of the Intelligence Group told CBS. "And that can get started on the Internet. That can get started just through friends. And it's very hard for a marketer to tap into that unless it's really a product that they like."

One company that seems to have cracked the code, according to CBS, is Toyota, which launched Scion, a car division, at the cost of hundreds of millions of dollars, just for echo boomers. The company's highly customizable cars are \$15,000 and it is spending 70 percent of the division's **promotional budget on events**, rather than traditional advertising strategies.

"People kind of just stumble on our product, and it's cool that way," Jim Farley, head of Toyota's Scion division, said to CBS. "This is how we expose our cars to young people ... I think how we've looked at it is that we can't afford not to do this." 

— M.W.



effective styles minimize headaches and wasted energy.

"Teens love tussie-mussies and bracelets, and you can make those way ahead of time," she says. "It's just like wedding work. You can have them done on Tuesday because they're fast, with minimal wiring and taping."

To keep close tabs on labor, De La Flor assigns one employee the task of heading up designs. Depending on the number of jobs, two to three other employees help out. Controlling cost of goods sold (COGS) is another challenge — "All those gems add up," as De

La Flor says. For that reason the shop keeps specific requirements about what, for example, a \$27 design entails and what a \$35 order receives.

Another way to reduce costs and increase profits? Don't be too specific in your sales pitch, says Mitchell, who like De La Flor, assigns one designer to head up prom work, bringing in an extra employee or two as needed.

"We started selling by color scheme, rather than specific flower, about three years ago," he says. "At the time, we were getting some complaints like, 'This iris doesn't exactly match the dress

color.' By being more general with the customers, talking about the feeling of the bouquet and a color scheme, we also can get better buys."

While the shop is happy to do custom work, Farrell's Florist, which is in within a 10-square-mile radius of about 10 private and public high schools, relies heavily on recipe-based designs (or, as they market them, "\$35 prom specials"), Farrell says. Customers are encouraged to shop by color palette and then designers choose flowers based on availability.

"We can purchase those flowers ahead



**Tim Farrell,
AAF, AIFD,
PFCI**

Farrell's Florist
Drexel Hall, Pa.
Number of high

schools nearby: 10

**Number of prom-related orders
a year: "In the thousands"**

Average prom sale: \$35

Yearbook-worthy quote: *"If you service teens with a smile and help them, educate them on flowers, they become comfortable with you. We know we have gotten a lot of wedding sales from prom sales."*

of time, and the discount — about a 20-percent savings — pushes the customer toward the special," he says. "It cuts down on custom work" and keeps COGS in line.

"Sometimes, as florists, we're our own worst enemies," Farrell continues. "Figure out your overhead, your materials, your labor and charge accordingly. You have get past the fear of not being the lowest priced. Customers are willing to pay for quality."

Detention Bound: *Being unprepared for teens.*

Head of the Class: *Having samples, staff and enthusiasm ready and waiting.*

As part of the so-called Echo Boom generation, teens expect instant gratification, Stoecker says. And, thanks to the Web, they're used to seeing what they are going to buy up front. (Read more about the Echo Boomers' spending habits on p. 26.)

"Have samples on your Web site and in your store," Stoecker says. "Make wait time minimal and, by all means, control the purchase by having a printed menu with options. If not, you could spend hours on consultations." (To see one florist's take on a Web page just from prom sales, see Web Wise, p. 14.)

To create the visual experience, Mitchell's Flowers has a foam core board with 4-inch by 6-inch pictures of past prom work to help teens (and sometimes their parents, usually a mom) get ideas. In Cooper City, De La Flor uses a similar selling strategy.

"We only give students a couple of options," says De La Flor, who favors dendrobium orchids, spray roses and hypericum for prom work. "I pin a sample on felt and then frame it with

Info To Go



Read about top prom trends from members of Professional Floral Communicators International (PFCI) and national magazine editors by clicking on the Info to Go logo on SAF's member Web site, www.safnow.org. Or, get it via Fast Fax by calling (888) 723-2000 and requesting document #914.

a picture frame. Then, they can choose different colors."

Educating teens and their parents also is important. Almost all of the florists Floral Management talked to encourage teens, like brides, to bring in fabric swatches or to shop with their dates. Salesmanship, particularly for add-on sales, goes a long way. For instance, a bracelet comes with a relatively high wholesale cost (about \$4), De La Flor says, and so she and her sales team always explain the keepsake value of the higher priced item.

During the consultation, it's also important for the shop to present itself as the local prom expert, proving to customers that the staff is on top of color and fashion trends, which means putting

Our flowers are growing in our farm *NOT growing old in Miami*

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Tony Medlock, AIFD, PFCI

PJ's Flowers and Gifts

Phoenix, Ariz.

Number of high schools

nearby: Two

Number of prom-related

orders a year: About 200

Average prom sale: Custom designs start at \$35



Yearbook-worthy

quote: "I think teens are getting into flowers. If the industry could get Christina

Aguilera to walk to the Grammys with a cool hand-tied, it would mean the world to florists."

in research time at shows, demonstrations and by reading national magazines.

"You have to set the trends in your area," De La Flor insists. "If you say, 'this is big,' it's big."

Farrell agrees. "Our designers look through books and magazines constantly," and polish their sales pitches to appeal to fashion-loving (and status-aware) teens, he says. "We're careful about our language. We'll say, 'French nosegay' because that sounds nicer than 'nosegay' or, 'This will really *accent* the dress' and 'this is very *sophisticated*.'"

Detention Bound: Working late, stressing out and getting behind.

Head of the Class: Working ahead.

Much of the advice offered up by prom-savvy florists centers around working smarter, not harder, a motto embraced by Tony Medlock, AIFD, PFCI, of PJ's Flowers and Gifts in Phoenix, Ariz.,

Photos To Go



Check out more photos of the florists featured in this month's story by clicking on the Photos to Go logo in the Floral Management section of SAF's member Web site, www.safnow.org

who is close to two high schools and does about 200 prom-related orders a year. Having a plan is especially important if a prom happens to fall around Mother's Day, when your staff may already be working at or near full capacity. (Don't despair if prom does fall on Mother's Day weekend: 35 years ago Wayne Jones was able to convince some Virginia Beach high schools to reconsider scheduling the dance on the holiday weekend simply by pointing out the potential conflict.)

"Hire one additional person to do

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Tina Stoecker,
AIFD, PFCI
Designs of the Times

Melbourne, Fla.

Number of high schools nearby:

Three major schools and two others in the area

Number of prom-related orders a year: 200 to 400-plus

Average prom sale: \$25

Yearbook-worthy quote: *"If you are not organized, you will have a store full of students taking an hour to decide on what color ribbon to add to the boutonniere."*

nothing but corsage work, and if you have all the prep work done, you might not even need that," Medlock says. "Anything you can do ahead of time, you should do. Work ahead."

At Designs of the Times, Stoecker and her team manage to get designs done early through organization and precision, beginning with the initial sale.

"As we take the order, the product is prepped," she says. "A number is put on the order and on the box. The day before, we use an assembly line to glue flowers and baby's breath. We can normally produce 300 to 400 corsages in a four-hour time span with three workers gluing. The corsages are placed in the cooler in numerical order and then the tickets are sorted alphabetically. When a customer comes in to claim his or her corsage, it is easy to locate the ticket by name and then a snap to located the corsage by number."

Detention Bound: *Writing off teens as immature or cheap.*

Head of the Class: *Seeing prom couples as potential life-long customers.*

Don't underestimate the value of a loyal teen customer, warns Medlock. The students who come into your shop could be

the brides and grooms you work with in the future.

"These (customers) are going to get engaged, married, have kids and work in a business or own one," he says. "Their parents and grandparents will die. What would five to 20 loyal customers mean to your business over their lifetime?"

"Teens are an untapped market," Stoecker adds. "We should look for ways to excite and entertain them with

flowers — unique ways to celebrate and remind this generation about the joy of giving and receiving flowers."

De La Flor couldn't agree more. "If you do a great job one year, these students will keep coming," she says. "They're incredibly loyal." 🌸

Mary Westbrook is a contributing writer and editor for Floral Management.

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